

# Future of the Contact Centre



**CONNECT**

Whitepaper

Five9®

# What is driving change?

Seen through the achievements of recent award winners and conference keynotes, it is clear just how rapidly UK contact centres are transforming. Enabled by technology, the very best organisations are re-imagining how they interact with customers and deliver memorable outcomes.

In doing so, these pioneers set new standards others will use as benchmarks in the years to come. For instance, they already leverage the combined power of cloud platforms and AI technologies to scale, flex and customise customer/colleague experience in real-time. A quantum leap for those still operating legacy infrastructure.

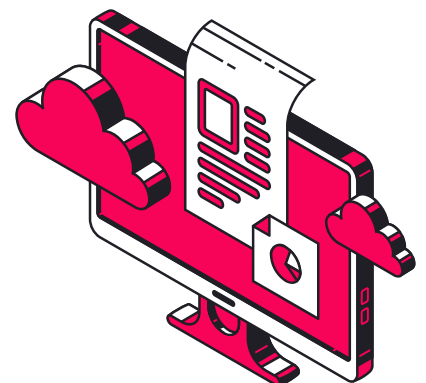
These leaders often have similar characteristics and behaviours.

They are obsessive about being the best. They strive for this through cross-functional teamwork which allows them to rapidly adapt, improve and innovate using agile principles.

They have empowered cultures that motivate. And they use automation strategically to refocus people where they can add unique human value. As such, their commercial and operating models are more resilient and profitable than legacy equivalents.

All this is being played out in a world that has become quite different. Relative to pre-pandemic times, it is now characterised by shortages in supply, labour and individual resilience.

Consumers are getting used to more of their favourite things being less available. Organisations are re-learning what it takes to find and keep employees whose work-life priorities have changed. And an expanding pool of vulnerable customers and colleagues reflects how the pandemic has depleted individual resilience - making empathy a boardroom topic in the process.



**Two out of three adults (66%) in the UK self-identify as having at least one vulnerability**



**49%**

are 'health vulnerable'



**20%**

lack confidence in managing money



**39%**

have experienced a traumatic life event in the past five years



**16%**

have requested to defer a bill payment

Source: CCMA Research - "Supporting Vulnerable Customers in the Contact Centre" (November 2021)

Meanwhile the rising cost of living exacerbates an anxiety many already feel. For these reasons alone, the need to adapt and meet these challenges successfully has never been clearer.

All this is fuelling a race to reinvent how organisations work. Disruptors have been showing us glimpses of what is possible over the last decade. We are now seeing that appetite extend, from legacy leaders to aspiring scale-ups.

Contact centres are part of this wider change. As organisations re-invent how they function, so too do contact centres. For instance, Fintech challenged the legacy banks. As a result of how they responded, some of the best examples of 'next generation' contact centres are now to be found across the global banking sector.

However, while common customer needs and expectations require a similar set of interaction and management capabilities, there is no single roadmap for getting there. Every organisation starts from a different place, with their own legacy ecosystem and culture as they plot a path towards this new North Star.

## The struggle to meet new needs.

Much of this change is being triggered by customers. Contactless engagement during the pandemic has resulted in enduring digital habits. Research shows greater uptake across all the modalities of voice, text and video whether live or self-service. That's despite the fact that many customers remain underwhelmed with the current way in which omni-channel is deployed.

Consumers have deepened their mobile lifestyles. Despite near universal adoption, many organisations still miss the point that



smartphones offer service designers a set of unique capabilities with which to reinvent customer interaction. And don't imagine that a digital first agenda must look a certain way. The pent-up desire for face-to-face engagement after prolonged lockdown has reminded us that we are social by nature. Living our lives in the presence of others matters as much to our well-being as the convenience of online shopping and the avoidance of crowds and effort. Customers want these worlds to fuse together rather than see one replaced by the other.

This struggle to meet new customer needs is mirrored in unmet employee needs. Working from home has been liberating in terms of commute-less working and greater flexibility. Equally it has been a lonely experience for many: not to mention exhausting, in terms of demanding customers and the limitations of using homes as proxy workplaces.

We know there is a road still to be travelled in terms of supporting hybrid working. Proactive well-being support is the new differentiator for those looking at organisations they want to be part of. This expectation extends from rebuilding resilience after months of isolation to delivering scalable, personalised learning pathways for those in pursuit of new career milestones.

Working from home has also been a technical challenge. Forklifting contact centres from an office to home environment was the stand-out event at the outset of the pandemic in terms of going 'above and beyond'. As we look forward, the issue becomes one of professionalising an environment that might have ended up being a temporary trend, until we came to terms with the business continuity implications of an enduring pandemic.

Therefore, gaps must now be closed in terms of system reliability and access, quality of service, available functionality, security and health and safety auditing of remote sites. The new reality is that permanent hybrid working implies common standards across office and home environments. No doubt the challenge of trying to achieve this outcome using on premise infrastructure will drive another cohort to experiment with cloud options in due course.

## Functions fade as organisations reinvent.

Traditionally contact centres have been as siloed as other functions. That's despite the first-hand insight that many service issues are generated upstream and could be fixed with proactive information sharing and a common commitment to continuous improvement. Even so, it has remained an uphill struggle.

Working from home has hammered home the need to collaborate to the extent that boundaries are starting to blur as new hybrid models emerge.

### **The adoption of collaboration platforms during lockdown has serviced multiple needs:**

- as a proxy for in-person huddles and ongoing colleague support.
- as a way to reach out across the organisation and beyond it into partner organisations, to fix specific customer issues.
- as a channel to amplify the customer voice in terms of current priorities.

Collaboration has become a workflow priority for contact centres and as such is helping dissolve tribal boundaries.

It has also started to dawn on frontline teams that customers expect authentic brand experiences in the sense that, as with personal relationships, a brand relationship should mature over time based on shared experiences. This requires tighter alignment between service, sales, and marketing teams.

Cloud platforms infused with AI intelligence make this a possibility. We can now unify customer journey management across these functional areas, using common infrastructure; shared access to customer data and insight; and by pooling a set of no code/low code resources to help cross-functional teams design relevant customer conversations that work together.

**Collaboration  
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What might this look like? Maybe customers are offered a consistent set of channels, whatever their need or lifecycle stage. Maybe they engage with just a single digital concierge, whose knowledge and capabilities consolidates what used to be housed in departmental bots.

Of course, this is only what the technology enables. The motivation and behavioural changes needed to work like this remain a leadership responsibility. However, the net effect is that customers would start to experience a brand relationship that develops over time, as guided by retained context and next best action predictions. One that will eliminate the more typical experience of needing to continuously re-introduce myself and re-explain the background of my current situation.

## Near-term goals.

Having explored a few longer-term implications, let's now return to more immediate ambitions: ones that are becoming table stakes in terms of customer expectation.

A key benefit of bringing channels, workflow and data into a single digital ecosystem is that orchestrating personalised journeys at scale becomes possible. This begins with understanding what the customer needs.

Until recently, the triage process was onerous and typically high effort for the customer. User experience of IVRs has for the most part been cognitively hard work and often unsuccessful in terms of facilitating the customer's actual intent.

One of the most exciting services coming out of the Cloud+AI fusion we have been exploring is digital voice; think next generation IVR. In this paradigm, the effort to understand reverts to the brand rather than the customer.

I can communicate as I would to another person and my needs are understood and responded to with relevant next actions.

Understanding intent and the multiple ways in which people can express them is part of the tuning and ongoing optimisation process that make digital voice, and voice/chatbots, successful. However, this understanding still needs to be put into context, so the most relevant next action is offered.

Some of the input for this decision comes from assessing the situation that the customer is currently actively engaged in. What can be learnt from their most recent digital footprint? The other input comes from evaluating the relevance of transactional and interaction histories. By combining these two sources, we can anticipate the customer's reason for contact and offer the best route to their desired outcome.

Sometimes the best decision is to offer self-service. Sometimes the better option is live assistance, even to the point of being able to match the customer with the most experienced colleague for that need. The agent is then automatically provided with the same contextual summary to enable conversational flow.

This ability to decipher customer conversations in real time is increasingly common and provides a transformational milestone to work towards. There are multiple benefits: fewer transfers and escalations save cost; faster and more effective resolutions please customers and safeguard operational capacity.

Once this is embedded, the same capability can be extended to the whole of a customer interaction and beyond. Understanding customer intent in real time (either voice or text) generates the next set of use cases we can leverage.

**The first is to assist colleagues.  
There are various ways of doing this.**

One is to anticipate needs during the conversation and proactively push knowledge and workflow to the agent desktop. Automation can refine this even further by offering pre-populated forms or by completing associated administration after the conversation finishes. This reduces colleague distraction and helps them focus on customer experience.

Another version offers on-screen coaching tips, based on real-time analysis of both the functional and emotive elements of the conversation. This can help onboard new





colleagues faster and provide operational managers with a powerful coaching tool to pinpoint issues and improve performance.

The second use case is generated from archived conversations that have already been analysed at scale for topic and sentiment. These become a powerful source of insight for trend analysis, journey optimisation and quality/performance reviews. They can also be used to augment any existing interaction analytics capability.

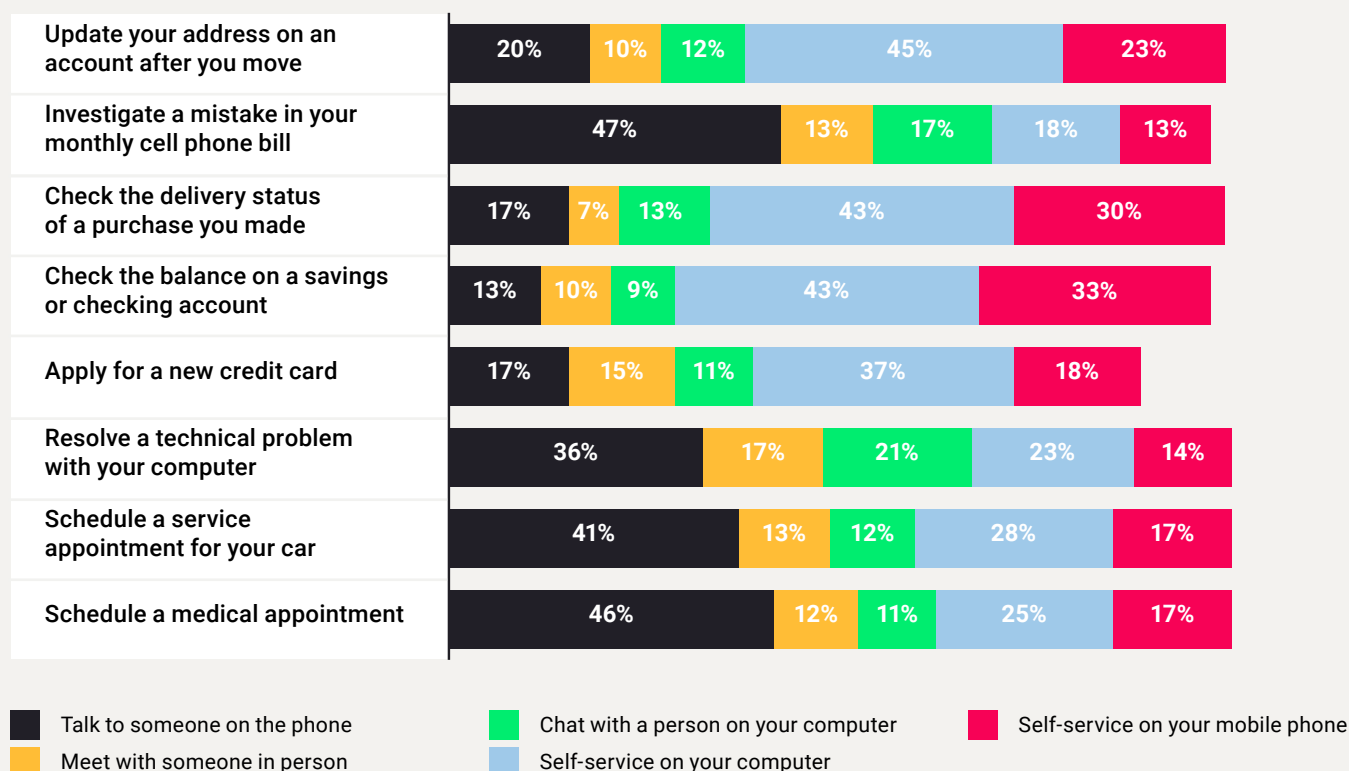
Resource planners can also tap into this insight to enrich their outcomes. This can be presented as real-time alerts on new trending topics to generate decisions on what this might imply for near-term headcount requirements.

Of course, resource planning also benefits from an injection of AI-driven algorithms. This is especially valuable in terms of intraday juggling and dynamic shift optimisation, which has become more complex as colleague self-management of their shifts has become more popular during lockdown to facilitate heightened work-life balance expectations.

## The importance of removing effort

The pandemic has made customers even more reliant on organisations to help them keep their lives on track. The pattern and volume of demand has changed for many sectors - in some cases,

### In which of the following ways would you prefer to do the following activities?



quite dramatically. Vulnerability has preserved demand for voice interaction, even though customers have shown a willingness to adapt and try new channels in ways not previously seen in the UK.

Although we are still behind the adoption curve seen in India and the Far East, omnichannel choice is now sufficiently complex that CX leaders need to rethink their approach. Research consistently shows that customers expect choice. Their needs and generational preference influence an intuitive decision to find the best route to their desired outcome.

Organisations clearly need to reflect that choice in terms of what they offer. However, they must achieve this without adding complexity, or face the consequences and lose customers.

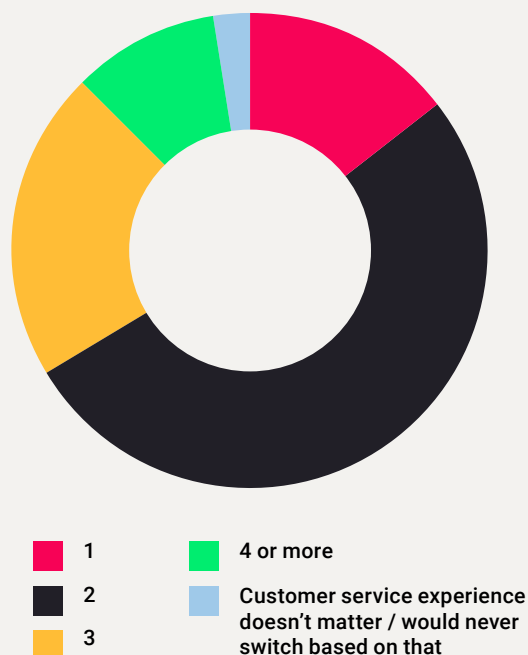
Ongoing research indicates just a few failed service encounters are enough motivation to leave a brand.

One of the current frustrations is that customers cannot complete their journey in their channel of choice. Maybe there are data privacy concerns, or a lack of integration between the workflow, such as a claims process, and the channel offer. The result? I can communicate but I can't complete.

Sometimes bots are abandoned even when powered by conversational AI. Human assistance is still needed because the journey itself remains too complex. This is a service design issue more than a technology failure.

Too much effort kills customer sentiment. Even more so when anxiety and short tempers are more prevalent. Equally, low effort interaction is something customers positively embrace and reward brands who deliver in terms of greater propensity to trust, forgive and remain long-term customers.

### After how many bad customer service experiences would you consider switching to a competitor?



Customer Contact Week - "Customer Experience Trends, Challenges & Innovations" (August 2020 Market Study)

**Of course, an even better approach is to anticipate customer needs and fulfill them even before they become a conscious concern for customers.**

- Pattern seeking algorithms can be focused on trawling conversation archives to surface the most common topics being asked at certain stages of key journeys.
- In the world of IoT, sensor tracking allows us to spot performance patterns that can anticipate service issues. Some car marques do this already, as do some components in smart homes.
- Fraud can be spotted and prevented in real time. The first thing a customer knows about it is the message updating them that the threat has now been dealt with.



# Final thoughts.

Although contact centre evolution has been constant over the last four decades, the intensity does vary. At present we are in a phase of accelerated movement caused by customers adapting to a rapidly changing world. Whether pioneer or late adopter, every organisation has needed to respond.

Happily, the current generation of technology is well matched. Whether pre-integrated or programmable, the options have never been richer. The migration path from on-premise or data centre hosted infrastructure into public and private cloud options continues to be trodden by organisations of every type and size.

Next generation contact centres are becoming integration hubs that reach across and even outside the organisation they are housed in. Knowledge, customer data, workflow and points of access can now be added at much greater speed than before. They are also becoming part of common cross-functional capability.

While there are general lessons to be learnt in terms of where to start and how to deliver better experiences and outcomes than before, it is important to architect a roadmap that fits your own circumstances. Choosing the right partner is therefore a crucial decision.

One way to test their abilities is to ask them how they would enable the following outcome given your current capability. It will lead to an interesting discussion.

**We hope this has helped you develop your future contact centre strategy. Thank you for reading.**

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